

## **Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation**

### **The Law and Health Project**

The Law and Health Project is a collaboration of Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation's (LOL) Murphysboro office, the Southern Illinois University School of Law, the Abundant Health Resource Clinic and Southern Illinois Healthcare (SIH). SIH is the largest health care provider in southern Illinois. For low-income, uninsured persons in central and southern Illinois access to health care is problematic. SIH helped establish the Abundant Health Resource Clinic to provide free medical care to low-income people who do not have private insurance or Medicaid. People who have appointments at the Clinic are told about the availability of free legal help and can schedule an appointment for the same day they see the doctor. In 2002, SIH provided funding for a law student for the pilot project. Now, an Americorps VISTA volunteer working with LOL's Murphysboro office does intake at the Clinic and conducts outreach.

The Participants other than LOL:

Abundant Health Resource Clinic (“AHRC”): A no cost clinic whose mission is to “serve the health and wellness needs of the medically underserved in Jackson County, IL”

Southern Illinois Healthcare (“SIH”): A not-for-profit health care system with 1700 employees.

Southern Illinois University School of Law Elderly Clinic (“SIU”): A legal clinic funded to provide free legal assistance to clients aged 60 or older.

The Problem: AHRC was created out of concern for low income families living in Jackson County who have limited or no access to medical services. All of its patients have no medical insurance. Since it first opened in December of 2000, AHRC has provided medical treatment to over 400 people and recently had its 1000<sup>th</sup> patient encounter. In Jackson County approximately one-sixth of the population or 6,000 people are without access to primary care services and they therefore, show up at hospitals with severe illnesses that could have been treated or perhaps even prevented, with proper medical intervention early on. These emergency room visits are at an alarmingly high cost and because the patients themselves cannot afford the costs nor do they have health insurance, the hospitals themselves have to absorb these costs. In an effort to increase the availability of primary care and to alleviate some of this financial hardship to the local hospitals, SIH became a major backer of AHRC. SIH owns and operates Memorial Hospital of Carbondale and St. Joseph’s Hospital in Murphysboro, Illinois. These are the two hospitals providing service to residents of Jackson County.

Recognizing that matters of a legal nature influence the improvement of a patient's health status, early in 2002, SIH developed a collaborative effort involving LOL and SIU to address the legal needs of those seeking care at the clinic. The initial effort was a 12-week pilot project to determine the extent of the legal needs of the patients of AHRC. This pilot project was been a great success and was the basis of our request for our current VISTA volunteer. Her work has been even more successful as she has worked toward the sustainability of this project by obtaining permission to have SIU law students use the project as an externship site. In its second year with a full time VISTA, the goal has been to build on the success of the first year and to solidify the relationships that have been established between LOL, SIH and SIU Elderly Clinic. We did further outreach to the community and more education of the caseworkers and nurses at the SIH facilities to educate them about the referral system, wrote grants to help with the project, and prepared training materials for the law student volunteers.

The VISTA works certain evenings at the Abundant Health Resource Clinic each month and anyone who is a patient there can make an appointment to see her to discuss any legal problem they might have. Most of the problems discussed involve Medicaid, disability benefits, domestic violence, housing, and consumer issues. The VISTA then brings the cases back to LOL where they are discussed with the staff attorney, who determines how best to assist the people with their legal problems.

The other way that cases are referred to the Project is by direct referral from a case manager or social worker in an SIH facility. If such an employee sees a person with a legal problem, she completes a direct referral form and faxes it to either LOL or if the person is over the age of 60, to the SIU Elderly Clinic. Once received, the VISTA (or someone at the Elderly Clinic) goes to the hospital and makes a legal house call while the person is still in the hospital.

This project has benefited not only Land of Lincoln's clients but also the healthcare partners. In its first 1 1/2 years of operation, the project obtained \$330,000 of Medicaid reimbursement for clients. Discussions are now underway between the partners concerning possible expansion of the project, with a greater financial commitment by the healthcare organizations.